

MAYOR'S SCHOOL WALKING CHALLENGE:
HOMEDALE MAYOR GHEEN CHRISTOFFERSEN

THE VIEW FROM THE GROUND

Homedale Mayor Gheen Christoffersen has lived in Homedale most of his life, but says the Mayor's School Walking Challenge gave him a new view on his community.

Mayor Gheen Christoffersen knows the small town of Homedale, Idaho as well as anybody. He's spent most of his childhood and all of his adulthood living and working there. But as well as he knows it, he says his participation in the Mayor's School Walking Challenge gave him a unique perspective on his community and inspired him to encourage his city – including schools and the police department – to get moving.

QUICK FACTS

- *Mayor Christoffersen says the MSWC gave him a new perspective on his community.*
- *The Mayor's enthusiasm for walking inspired a friendly city employee walking competition that has continued beyond the MSWC.*
- *Homedale is using walking-themed events and activities as a catalyst to build a strong sense of community.*

The Mayor started by trying to set an example as part of the Mayor's School Walking Challenge, a

one-month event that encourages students and mayors to lace up their sneakers and walk.

"I thought it would be a great way to get our community involved," he explains. "I just thought if we can figure out how to get the kids involved from the school, we would get the parents involved and we'd have a healthier place to live."

An initiative of the Blue Cross of Idaho Foundation for Health, the Challenge outfitted mayor's across Southwest Idaho with FitBits, an internet-enabled pedometer that accurately tracks calories burned and the number of steps taken each day. The mayors are encouraged to walk with schoolchildren who also track their walking during the month. Those with the most steps win grant funds that can be used on food service and physical activity equipment.

Each day Mayor Christoffersen would walk from his home on one side of the Snake River to his office on the other, then back across to City Hall – about a mile or so each way. At lunch and in the evenings, Mayor Christoffersen would put in additional miles, often late into the night.

"I walked all the streets of town," he says. "You don't realize it until you actually do it, you've got a totally different outlook for your community when you walk it. What the roads are like.. what the houses are like... what the citizens are like."

As he started to see personal success shedding pounds and feeling better, he worked to spread his

newfound enthusiasm for walking with others. The city purchased FitBits for all city employees, from maintenance workers to police officers and began a quarterly walking competition between departments, with the losing department buying the others lunch.

“It’s really caught on,” the Mayor says. “There have been a lot of little changes in our city employees. Now we mostly walk instead of drive to get the mail. And you hear coworkers encouraging each other to get their steps in. You even notice them walking along on their lunch hour, putting in a couple laps around the block.”

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In addition to activating City Hall, Mayor Christoffersen used the Mayor’s School Walking Challenge to engage with his local schools and encourage other city officials to do the same — something that’s continued even after the Challenge ended.

“Throughout the year any time the schools want us to come walk, we’ll come to walk,” he says. “I had kids wanting to walk with me in the middle of January. It was awesome.”

The enthusiasm spread through the entire community.

“People would come up and talk to me when they saw me out walking. They’d say, ‘I really think what you’re doing is a great deal.’”

Mayor Christoffersen believes that this enthusiasm around walking, which started with his simple decision to get involved with the Mayor’s School Walking Challenge, will be an important ingredient in his efforts to transform Homedale into an even healthier place to live.

“I think through programs like this we can become closer knit,” Mayor Christoffersen says. “It’s a great community to live in. Not just to be from, but to be a part of.”